Welfare and Democratic Legitimacy: The Impact of Need-Based Welfare on Women’s Political Engagement in Latin America and the United States

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Defended April 8th, 2019

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Abstract
Political engagement from a diverse populace is vital for the functioning of a legitimate democracy that proportionately represents the interests of the governed people. Impoverished women experience at least two forms of oppression due to their socioeconomic status and gender—and often other forms of oppression—which intersect to enhance their marginalization and exclusion from the political sphere. This research compares data from the United States and Latin America to discover if receiving welfare benefits from the government can mobilize or hinder low income women from engaging in politics. This research analyzes welfare’s impact on three forms of political engagement: political attitudes, civic engagement, and conventional political participation. This study finds that women who receive welfare in Latin America experience higher levels of two forms of political engagement—political attitudes and civic engagement—while welfare offers no correlation with any of the three tested forms of political engagement among women in the United States. Women who receive welfare in both Latin America and the United States are not more likely to engage in conventional forms of political participation, with the exception of Colombia. Colombia is used as a case study to understand its divergence from the trend of insignificance between welfare and conventional political engagement found in every other country. Understanding the incongruency of welfare’s mobilizing power between the United States and Latin America could allow for the adoption of different welfare policies, and changes in cultural perceptions of welfare that could result in more representative and legitimate governments.
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Introduction

Political engagement among marginalized groups is essential for democratic legitimacy. Understanding what mobilizes populations traditionally excluded from the political sphere to engage in politics can influence strategies and services to increase participation more effectively, and hence create governments that better represent the interests of their people. Women have historically been excluded from the political sphere, and low income people are less likely to have their voices heard by the polity. Thus, to identify methods to increase political engagement of marginalized groups, low income women must be centered in the evaluation. To create a more legitimate and representative government, it is crucial to understand: what influences political participation among low income women?

To narrow the scope of this question, my research focuses on the political participation of an increasingly marginalized group: women who receive financial assistance through government funded need-based welfare programs. Welfare programs are implemented by governments to assist low income people, and are often targeted towards aiding women, due to a heightened concern about child poverty. Welfare programs create a unique reciprocal relationship between welfare recipients whose livelihoods are dependent on the government, and elected officials who have the power to allocate government money to fund welfare programs. Although relatively close geographically—and although women gained the right to vote within decades of each other (Strong-Boag et al. 2017)—studies have indicated a divergent trend in welfare’s impact on women’s political engagement in Latin American and the United States. Past research has indicated an increase in political participation among Latin American women who receive welfare (Dunn 2017), while studies have illustrated that women who receive welfare in the United States are less likely to be engaged in politics (Swartz et al. 2009). Comprehension of
this variation can elucidate how different aspects of welfare programs can encourage or hinder different types of political engagement within a population traditionally excluded from political discourse. Thus, it is important to discern: how does welfare affect political engagement among women in Latin America and the United States? I take a comparative approach to understand the previously proposed variation in welfare’s ability to mobilize political engagement in Latin America and the United States, and center my analysis on women. My research uses a quantitative method to discover if welfare affects how women participate in different forms of political engagement in Latin America and the United States.

Past research has indicated a correlation between income and voter turnout in both Latin America and the United States, in that low income people are significantly less likely to vote than high income people (Desposato and Norrander 2009; Leighley and Nagler 2014). Poverty is a prerequisite for receiving need-based assistance, and therefore the income level of welfare recipients correlate to a statistically lower rate of political engagement. This relationship between income and political participation disparately affects women, as women who do not depend on men financially represent a disproportionately large percentage of impoverished people (US Census Bureau 2018). Data from the United States illustrates that women represent 55% of all people living below the poverty line, and 58% of the voting age population living in poverty (US Census Bureau 2018). The feminization of poverty is often explained through the increased poverty of single mothers (United Nations 2015), and welfare programs are implemented to assist this specific population. Programs in the United States such as WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), as well as Microfinance and Conditional Cash Transfer programs in Latin America, target women with children.
Comprehending the relationship between welfare and political engagement can suggest how well respective governments create diverse electors, and thus how successfully they increase their own legitimacy. Having the voices of marginalized groups heard in the political sphere is essential for the creation of representative policies, and forming a government that better represents the interests of its people. Discovering how government welfare programs interact with political attitudes, civic engagement, and conventional forms of political participation, can influence policies and services to provide smoother paths to political engagement for marginalized people.

I hypothesize my research will find differences between welfare’s impact on different types of political engagement within Latin America and the United States as a result of the different conditions of welfare programs, and different cultural attitudes towards welfare. I hypothesize that women in Latin America feel empowered by receiving welfare, and therefore feel inclined to engage with politics, whereas I posit women in the United States feel stigmatized for receiving welfare, which alienates them from engaging in politics. I offer a unique perspective on this relationship by drawing a comparison between Latin America and the United States, and illustrating the varying impacts welfare has on women’s political engagement between the regions.

**Existing Research**

Existing research illustrates a correlation between government welfare programs and increased levels of political engagement throughout Latin American countries (Zucco 2013; De La O 2013; Layton and Smith 2011; Baez et al. 2013). Fewer studies have been conducted on the relationship between welfare and political engagement in the United States, however, small-scale
studies have found lower levels of political engagement among American welfare recipients (Swartz et al. 2009), and increased political engagement among recipients after welfare eligibility became more restrictive (Corman et al. 2017). While multiple studies provide data to explain welfare’s impact on political engagement, only research conducted by Dunn (2017) aims to discover a direct relationship between women who receive welfare and political engagement. However, Dunn (2017) exclusively studied countries within Latin America, and restricted their data to recipients of one type of welfare program—Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs). Existing literature supplements my hypotheses with related data, and influences the variables I use in this study, yet my research is unique in its approach.

The existing research on welfare’s relationship with political engagement throughout Latin America and the United States is divided between two units of analysis: the community and the individual. Community level studies in Latin America have analyzed regional percentages of welfare recipients and voting booth data in order to illustrate how municipalities with different percentages of welfare recipients turn out to vote at different rates (De La O 2013; Baez et. al 2013). A quantitative experimental study analyzed how municipality voting habits shifted after a community started to take part in a Conditional Cash Transfer program during a randomized trial of CCTs in Mexico (De La O 2013). In a community-level study in the United States, Avery and Peffley (2005) use municipalities as the unit of analysis to determine income’s relationship with voting, voter registration, and the passing rate of strict welfare restrictions. While using communities as a unit of analysis can imply a shift in welfare recipients’ levels of political engagement, the relationship remains abstract as it is hard to control for external effects; there are many factors that can contribute to increased voting rates within a municipality, and it is difficult to distinguish whether it is welfare recipients casting the votes.
The majority of studies I draw from use individuals as the unit of analysis and utilize data from surveys. Studies within Latin America on this topic tend to utilize the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey (Dunn 2017; Layton and Smith 2011; Haime 2017; Gitter and Barham 2008). These surveys are conducted by survey representatives, and a standard set of questions are asked in each country to ensure consistency. The surveys create a database, which allows for an effective comparison between countries. The data collected for these surveys can be used for trans-national comparisons using individuals as the unit of analysis. In the United States, studies that use individuals as the unit of analysis are scarce, and those that have been conducted use small sample sizes that may not be indicative of larger trends. These samples include students at public high schools in St. Paul, Minnesota (Swartz et al. 2009), and three neighborhoods in Boston, Massachusetts (Jennings 2001). Although the LAPOP is conducted in the United States, it has not been utilized to illustrate the relationship between welfare and political engagement. The surveys that have been utilized in studies about the United States are the Youth Development Study (Swartz et al. 2009) and the November Current Population Surveys (Corman et al. 2017). A larger study about voter turnout used the Current Populations Survey, but focused on income inequality and demographics of voters, and did not consider the impact of welfare (Leighley and Nagler 2014).

Studies that applied a qualitative approach to understanding welfare and political engagement are less common than quantitative studies, and act as a valuable supplement to quantitative results. Molyneux and Thomson (2011) conducted interviews, observed families who received CCTs, attended meetings for CCT recipients, and spoke with community leaders about CCT programs in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru. Their results and observations are valuable to my research, as I did not conduct interviews or observe the communities I analyze, and having
data derived from this method supplements my statistical data. In the United States, Jennings (2001) conducted interviews with community representatives from racially diverse neighborhoods in Boston to provide insight into their quantitative findings (Jennings 2001). Jennings’ interviews are less valuable to my research, as the sample size is small, and the evident partisanship of the researcher implies a potential for bias in the data.

Demographics:

Past research has found a correlation between political engagement and age, income, and employment (Desposato and Norrander 2009; Haime 2017). Significantly more research has been conducted on these correlations than on welfare and political engagement, but these data assist my research by illustrating the variables I need to control for in my study. Research conducted by both Dunn (2017) and Leighley and Nagler (2014) also use these variables as controls in their studies. By controlling for known influences on political participation I demonstrate how welfare programs themselves affect political engagement in Latin America and the United States.

Studies conducted in the United States (Leighley and Nagler 2014) and Latin America (Desposato and Norrander 2009) have found age to be significantly correlated to voter turnout. Desposato and Norrander (2009) found that age had a negative effect on conventional forms of political participation when comparing women’s political participation rates to men, however, younger and older women vote at similar rates.

Research has found correlations between income and voting in both Latin America and the United States (Desposato and Norrander 2009; Haime 2017; Leighley and Nagler 2014). Lower income people are significantly less likely to vote than higher income people, and there is
a consistent and proportional rise in political participation rates as income level increases (Desposato and Norrander 2009; Haime 2017; Leighley and Nagler 2014). Research conducted on Latin America has provided evidence of a relationship between receiving welfare and increased income (Bastagli 2011; Molyneux and Thomson 2011). These findings, in conjunction with the findings that income increases political engagement (Desposato and Norrander 2009; Leighley and Nagler 2014) indirectly illustrate that welfare can increase political engagement. Transitively, if income is correlated with increased political engagement and welfare programs are correlated with increased income, then welfare programs can increase political participation. My research bridges the gap between these two findings to show a direct relationship.

A longitudinal study of the United States found that higher levels of education is accompanied with a proportional increase in voter turnout (Leighley and Nagler 2014). This research also illustrates that women are more likely to vote than men, controlling for income and level of education (Leighley and Nagler 2014). Although gendered voting trends in the United States have shifted in past decades, voter turnout has remained stratified based on education level and income level (Leighley and Nagler 2014). Education is related to political participation in Latin America, as the more years a person spends in school, the more likely they are to vote (Desposato and Norrander 2009). One study uses a ratio of female to male education levels in a household as an indicator of household power dynamics to explain how women with more education—and therefore more power—were more likely to follow the conditions of their CCTs (Gitter and Barham 2008). Gitter and Barham (2008) argue this increases women recipients’ household income levels and likelihood of enrolling their children in school (Gitter and Barham 2008). Again, this increase in income suggests an indirect relationship with political engagement (Desposato and Norrander 2009). However, CCTs do not increase uneducated women’s
participation, as women who receive benefits are not more likely to attain an education than they were before they received benefits (Molyneux and Thomson 2011).

Compulsory voting:

Studies on Latin America have been conducted to find the effect mandatory voting laws have on voter turnout rate. Only a handful of countries with compulsory voting laws enforce them with sanctions, but those which do enforce them experience a voter turnout rate around 20% higher than countries without enforced mandatory voting laws (Fornos et al. 2004). This relationship is hypothesized as a response to the sanctions experienced for failing to vote (Fornos et al. 2004); the opportunity cost of voting is lower than the cost experienced for failing to cast a ballot. There have not been large scale studies done on the relationship between welfare programs and compulsory voting, yet the strong correlation between voter turnout and enforced compulsory voting laws illustrates the need for compulsory voting laws to be used as a control variable when studying political engagement in Latin America.

Conditional Cash Transfers:

The most abundant data on welfare recipients’ political engagement are about Latin American recipients of Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) welfare programs. These programs are targeted towards mothers, and provide small sums of money each month to women living in poverty (Bastagli 2011). The conditions that accompany cash transfers vary by country and program, but often consist of recipients attending community meetings with other CCT recipients, seeing healthcare professionals, and keeping their children in school (Bastagli 2011; Molyneux and Thomson 2011). Research that analyzes the mobilizing abilities of CCTs have
found that recipients of these programs have higher levels of political efficacy, report being more interested in politics, and participate in politics more frequently than similarly situated people who do not receive CCT benefits (Dunn 2017; De La O 2013; Baez et. al 2013). The majority of data on CCTs are quantitative and use survey data from the LAPOP and coded interview results from Latinobarometro surveys (Dunn 2017; De La O 2013).

Past research has found a connection between receiving CCTs and increased income (Gitter and Barham 2008), increased community engagement (Molyneux and Thomson 2011), and increased voting rates (Dunn 2017; De La O 2013). However, CCTs accomplish little in terms of assisting public health, education, and female empowerment without the assistance of other programs (Bastagli 2011). Rather than limiting my analysis to only CCT programs, as many studies have done before, I include them in the variable of ‘welfare program’. Some of the countries I use in my research do not have CCT programs, so to adequately compare the countries I do not specify between types of need-based welfare.

The relationship between receiving CCTs and increased political participation has led to a debate about whether CCTs act as a form of clientelism (Zucco 2013). The argument that CCTs create a clientele relationship is rooted in CCT recipients’ overwhelming preference for incumbent politicians (De La O 2013; Baez et. al 2013; Zucco 2013; Layton and Smith 2011). Researchers who believe this relationship is clientelist argue that the money given to recipients by the government is how politicians pay for the votes of impoverished people (Zucco 2013). Researchers who do not believe CCT recipients’ preference for incumbent politicians is cliental instead argue that the incumbent preference and increased voter turnout among CCT recipients is indicative of a rational choice to vote for politicians who promote their interests (Manacorda et al. 2011).
Political Attitudes:

There is evidence of a relationship between receiving welfare and increased interest in the government in Latin America (Dunn 2017) as well as the inverse relationship between welfare and political attitudes in the United States (Swartz et al. 2009). Research conducted by Haime (2017), found that political interest is correlated to other forms of political engagement within Latin America. These studies illustrate how social benefits impact political attitudes, which thus impact other forms of political engagement.

A case study of people who received benefits from a temporary social program in Uruguay explains that recipients’ preference for the government that provided them with financial assistance is a result of shifting attitudes and a more positive opinions about a government which personally benefited them (Manacorda et al. 2011). After their temporary benefits subsided, the recipients of the program were still supportive of the government and the politicians at that time the program was implemented, as they trusted the government, and believed it was invested in their well-being (Manacorda et al. 2011). The recipients’ beliefs that they were important to the government indicates their increased political efficacy, and their lasting support for the government illustrates their interest in government. It is argued that poorly informed voters—which is a status that often coincides with people disinterested in government—support administrations that assist them personally, indicating that the rational choice to vote is a result of a shift in opinions about politics (Manacorda et al. 2011).

The results from Corman et al.’s (2017) research indirectly implies a rational choice for welfare recipients in the United States to engage in politics. This study centered women when analyzing welfare’s correlation with voter turnout, and found that women who still received
welfare after the 1996 welfare cuts were more likely to vote than female welfare recipients before the passage of this Act. Corman et al. (2017) does not pose explanations for this relationship, but I hypothesize it is indicative of shifted political attitudes and a rational choice for welfare recipients to vote in order to protect their benefits, which were in danger of being eliminated. Thus, these findings suggest threats to welfare act to mobilize recipients to vote. This is enhanced by research that depicts fewer welfare restriction policies are passed when the ratio of low-income to high-income voters is lower (Avery and Peffley 2005).

The increase in voter turnout among lower income people in the United States during high-stakes elections is also indicative of a shift in political attitudes (Leighley and Nagler 2014). Leighley and Nagler (2014) suggest that lower income people rationally decide if the policies of candidates will have a large impact on their life—positively or negatively—and do a rational cost-benefit analysis. The opportunity cost of voting is higher for low income people who may have a harder time registering and getting to the polls, hence their choice to vote is dependent on the way the elections will impact their own well-being and whether they believe their voice can influence the polity (Leighley and Nagler 2014).

Civic Engagement:

Studies have found correlations between receiving welfare and community engagement in the United States and Latin America. Studies that utilized data on CCTs in Latin America have found a positive relationship between receiving CCTs and being involved in the community (Molyneux and Thomson 2011; Dunn 2017). Dunn (2017) used LAPOP survey data to illustrate how Latin American CCT beneficiaries are significantly more likely to attend community and political meetings. In a gendered analysis, Dunn (2017) found that female beneficiaries were not
more likely to engage in the community than male beneficiaries, but that both men and women participated in more community events. Qualitative interviews conducted with female CCT recipients in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, found that women recipients were likely to report engaging more in the community after they began receiving benefits (Molyneux and Thomson 2011).

There are mixed findings about how welfare impacts community engagement in the United States. One study found that welfare recipients are less likely to be engaged in the community (Jennings 2001). This was proposed as a result of welfare programs’ focus on individuals, rather than on building supportive communities (Jennings 2001). Jennings (2001) argues that recipients may have more money, food, or supplies because of welfare, but they do not have the support necessary to create a sustainable community that would break the cycle of poverty. These results contrast the results of a different study of the United States, which concluded that welfare recipients engage in civic life at similar rates as similarly situated non-recipients, and they only diverged from that trend in regards to voter turnout (Swartz et al. 2009). Swartz et al. (2009) explains the lack of political efficacy among welfare recipients in the United States as a response to the stigma placed on need-based welfare programs and thus welfare recipients. Both of these studies use small sample sizes that are unlikely to be indicative of the United States population as a whole, therefore I plan to re-analyze these findings with more representative data.

Conventional Political Participation:

Marginalized people face structural barriers to conventional forms of political participation in the United States and Latin America (Leighley and Nagler 2014; De La O 2013).
The results from a study conducted through surveys in the United States illustrate that voter registration laws affect turnout among lower income voters (Avery and Peffley 2005). Avery and Peffley (2005) also found that welfare eligibility requirements implemented through ballot measures were more likely to be adopted in areas with a lower ratio of low income to high income voters. This research concluded that lower income people in the United States—who are most likely to receive benefits—are the least likely to be able to vote to prevent harsher restrictions for welfare eligibility (Avery and Peffley 2005).

Research conducted in Latin America found that low income people face difficulties in terms of registering to vote and voting, and that female recipients of CCTs were more likely to register to vote and vote than similarly situated women who did not receive CCTs (Baez et. al 2013; De La O 2013). A proposed reason for this increase in voting was that government issued identification cards are given to recipients of welfare programs, which are required for voter registration in most Latin American countries (Dunn 2017; De La O 2013).

Gender itself acts as a barrier to conventional political participation; as of 1998, men were significantly more likely than women to engage in traditional forms of politics in Latin America (Desposato and Norrander 2009). Women were traditionally viewed as domestic workers, therefore their realm was the private sphere and they did not engage in public activities. Data from 2014 on voter turnout in the United States illustrates that women vote more than men (Leighley and Nagler 2014). Controlling for income and education, women were 5% more likely to vote than similarly situated men, and overall make up 52% of voters (Leighley and Nagler 2014). This implies that women are more likely to be lower income and less educated, and illustrates how the social structure of gender can impact political participation both directly and indirectly through the feminization of poverty.
Contribution:

My research builds upon past studies, and shows a direct relationship between women receiving welfare and three types of political engagement. I use the majority of past research to influence my control variables, and to lead my research in a previously unstudied direction. I provide a comparison between countries in Latin America and the United States, which is a relationship that has yet to be analyzed. I include multiple types of welfare programs in my definition of welfare, while employing an analysis that exclusively examines women. Research about welfare and political mobilization is scarce in the United States, and this is one of the first large-scale, individual-level analyses of the impacts need-based government assistance has on political participation.

Hypotheses

Although my research is focused on government welfare programs’ impact on women’s political engagement, I also consider how age and income affect political engagement. Past research has shown a positive correlation between these variables in Latin America (Desposato 2009) and in the United States (Leighley and Nagler 2014). The relationship between these variables will not negate my findings, as marginalization in these areas tends to overlap in people who receive welfare. Thus, my research is not focused on the direct relationship between age, income and political engagement, but rather how welfare can impact female recipients’ ability to overcome these structural barriers. I postulate how welfare correlates with three forms of political engagement among women in the United States and Latin America: political participation, political attitudes, and civic engagement.
Political Attitude:

One hypothesis I test is that welfare has an impact on women recipients’ attitude towards politics. This stems from the assumption that people who benefit from a government program would be more likely to view the governing body that allotted them their benefits favorably. Although attitudes may not translate directly to participation, finding a relationship between welfare and political attitudes can illustrate how welfare programs mobilize recipients to internally participate in the political realm. I use data about political interest, trust in the local government and trust in local elections because trust and interest are indicators of general feelings towards the system of governance. I argue that political attitudes can also indicate the level of political efficacy a person has; someone who trusts elections, trusts the government, and is interested in politics would be more likely to think their opinion matters to the polity. I predict welfare will have a larger impact on the political attitudes of women recipients in Latin America than in the United States. Since women are chosen to receive welfare in Latin America rather than their husbands due to women’s perceived responsibility (Molyneux and Thomson 2011), receiving welfare may be accompanied with pride and gratitude that translates into trust and interest for the institution that considers them trustworthy and responsible enough to receive assistance.

Civic Engagement:

A second hypothesis I test is that welfare impacts local forms of political engagement by influencing civic engagement among recipients. Civic engagement is expressly political, as engaging within a community allows the opinions and voices of participants to be heard. Civic
engagement has also been found to correlate to other forms of political participation in Latin America (Dunn 2017), making it a potential measure of other forms of political engagement. I use the attendance of community meetings and the attendance of women’s meetings as indicators of civic engagement among welfare recipients.

I predict that the empowering or stigmatizing depictions of welfare programs affect the way recipients interact within their community, as people who feel stigmatized would be less likely to engage with their community and those who feel empowered would be more likely to be civically engaged. Therefore, I anticipate welfare will enhance civic engagement among Latin America welfare recipients, and inhibit civic engagement among welfare recipients in the United States. I hypothesize the cultural attitude of responsibility surrounding welfare will empower recipients and thus enhance community engagement in Latin America. Latin American women who receive benefits are also encouraged to attend community meetings (Molyneux and Thomson 2011), which increases their civic engagement and their sense of responsibility to their community. I predict welfare will have a negative effect on civic engagement among women in the United States because of the stigma that is associated with receiving welfare (Swartz et al. 2009). The United States has a strong individualistic culture, where those who require assistance are seen as irresponsible, and are blamed for their inability to support themselves (Jennings 2001). I posit that people experiencing this stigma will feel less connected to their communities and will thus be less civically engaged.

Conventional Political Participation:

A third hypothesis I test is that welfare is correlated to conventional political participation. I use voting and voter registration status as indicators of conventional political
participation, as the people who partake in these activities recognize their actions as political and the effects of voting can directly impact the polity. I hypothesize women who receive welfare in Latin America are more likely to vote than similarly situated Latin American women, while women who receive welfare in the United States will be less likely to vote. Past research has found a positive relationship between welfare and voting in Latin America (Dunn 2017; Baez et. al 2013), and has implied the inverse relationship in the United States (Swartz et al. 2009). I predict my results will be congruent with these findings.

**Data and Methods**

To test my hypotheses, I use data from the 2014 Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey, which provides information on demographics and opinions from most countries within Latin America and the United States every other year. I use data from the United States and twenty Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Suriname, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. In total, there were 35,944 observations in these countries. However, due to the feminization of poverty, the historical lack of women’s political participation, and the gendered approach of Latin American welfare policies, I look exclusively at women—which brought the number of observations down to 18,517. Questions about welfare were asked in every country, but not to every respondent, which brought the total number of observations I use in this study to 16,012.

To account for compulsory voting laws within Latin America, I create a variable to control for enforced mandatory voting. Multiple Latin American countries with mandatory voting laws do not enforce them, thus these countries are not considered to have mandatory
voting laws for this variable. The variable represents countries without enforced compulsory voting laws, countries with enforced compulsory voting laws for literate citizens (Brazil, Ecuador), and countries with enforced compulsory voting laws for all citizens (Argentina, Peru, Uruguay) (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Commissions 2018). The variable for compulsory voting is omitted in each regression for the United States, as there are not enforced compulsory voting laws within the United States. Along with the variable controlling for compulsory voting, I control for household income, coded as ‘q10new’ and age, coded as ‘q2y’. I do not control for gender, since my research exclusively utilizes data on women.

The independent variable I test is whether respondents receive assistance from government welfare programs. To create this variable, I combined the survey question asking if the respondent received need-based welfare from the government (WF1), with the question asking if the participant received conditional cash transfers from the government (CCT1B). If the respondent answered yes to either of these questions, I considered them welfare recipients.

I use three dependent variables to test my hypothesis that welfare affects political attitudes: political interest (POL1), trust in local government (B32), and trust in local elections (B47A). I argue these three variables represent recipients’ attitudes towards the government, and can thus indicate how welfare relates to intra-personal forms of political engagement.

I use two dependent variables to test my hypothesis that welfare has a relationship with civic engagement: whether the respondent has attended community meetings (NP1), and attendance of women’s meetings (CP20). Civic engagement is a non-conventional form of political engagement, where people work at the meso-level to create changes in their community. Past research has indicated civic engagement is stratified based on cultural perceptions of
welfare (Swartz et al. 2009). Thus, the results of this hypothesis can indicate both welfare’s relationship with meso-level political engagement and cultural attitudes towards welfare.

I use voter turnout and voter registration status as dependent variables for my hypothesis that welfare is correlated to conventional political participation. The question I use to analyze voter turnout is coded as VB2 and asks if the respondent voted in the latest presidential election. This is the most obvious form of political engagement, where participants inherently acknowledge that their actions are political. The question I use for voter registration status is coded as VB1, and asks whether the respondent is currently registered to vote. I do not include respondents whose voter registration status was pending at the time of the survey.

The LAPOP data I use is available to the public through Vanderbilt University, and can be downloaded into Stata, which is the software I used to analyze regressions. I run regressions and logits, and estimate marginal plot graphs to visually represent my data. I consider coefficients with a P value less than 0.05 significant, and coefficient values that are considered significant by this standard are bolded in each regression.

Results:

This study found that receiving welfare is significant for mobilizing two forms of political engagement in Latin America, and has no significant relationship with any of the three tested forms of political engagement in the United States. Latin American women who receive welfare are more likely to be civically engaged, and are more likely to have stronger and positive attitudes towards the government. The positive relationship between welfare and political engagement in Latin America, and the lack of relationship between the two in the United States, implies that there are significant differences in the way welfare is implemented or perceived in
the two regions. Welfare does not have an impact on conventional political participation in either Latin America or the United States, with the exception of Colombia, where women who receive welfare are more likely to cast a vote. Since Colombia is unique in this relationship, I use it as a case study to understand why welfare has a different mobilizing power for political participation in Colombia than in other countries.

**Political Attitudes:**

Overall, women who receive welfare in Latin America are more likely to have positive attitudes towards politics and the government, while welfare has no relationship with political attitudes among women in the United States. Women who receive welfare in Latin America are more likely to be interested in politics, trust local elections, and trust local government than similarly situated Latin American women who do not receive welfare.

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<td># of Observations</td>
<td>13,903</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>12,516</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>13,760</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 1: This regression illustrates how welfare interacts with political attitudes of women in the United States and Latin America. Welfare is correlated to increased political interest, trust in local elections, and trust in local government among Latin American women, and there is no relationship between welfare and political interest, trust in elections or trust in local government among women in the United States. Significant coefficients are bolded.
As indicated in Table 1, women who receive welfare in Latin America are more likely to be interested in politics than similarly situated women who do not receive welfare, while women who receive welfare in the United States are not more likely to be interested in politics. The positive relationship within Latin America is consistent with the findings of past research conducted by Dunn (2017), De La O (2013) and Baez et. al (2013). Income and age are positively related to political interest in Latin America and the United States, illustrating that higher income and older people report being more interested in politics. Thus, welfare’s ability to increase political interest among women in Latin America overcomes the income barrier and allows lower income women to engage in political discourse. The contrast between welfare’s mobilizing ability in Latin America and the lack of significant relationship welfare has with political interest in the United States illustrates that it may not be the presence or absence of welfare programs, but rather the context and conditions of welfare programs that affect welfare recipients’ political interest.


Graph 1: This marginal effects plot illustrates the predicted effect welfare has on political interest within Latin America (left), and the United States (right). The graph depicts positive co-efficient for each variable, yet significance in Latin America and not the United States.
The regression in Table 1 illustrates that women who receive welfare in Latin America are more likely to trust local elections, while there is no relationship between women receiving welfare and trust in local elections in the United States. Trust in local elections is indicative of general feelings towards the government; people who feel elections are fair are more likely to see the government as legitimate (Desposato and Norrander 2009), and are more likely to have positive feelings towards the government. Trust in elections has been shown to have a large effect on other forms of political engagement as well; people who lack confidence in elections or who suspect electoral fraud are less likely to vote (Desposato and Norrander 2009).

Welfare’s relationship with trust in elections in Latin America indicates how receiving welfare can enhance the perceived legitimacy and trustworthiness of political processes. The lack of relationship between trust in elections and welfare in the United States suggests that the structure of welfare—or the perception of welfare—does not create the same positive feelings and confidence in the government as welfare programs in Latin America.

Similarly to trust in local elections, women who receive welfare in Latin America are more likely to trust their local government, while receiving welfare in the United States is not related to women’s trust in the local government. Trusting the government is an expression of positive attitudes towards the government. Therefore, welfare has a positive affect on the political attitudes of female recipients in Latin America, and no effect on the political attitudes of women who in the United States. I argue Latin American women’s increased confidence in the local government is a response to the perceived personal benefits welfare recipients receive from the government; the government is helping the welfare recipient by providing them with assistance, thus the recipient considers the government a generous, trustworthy institution. The absence of a significant relationship between receiving welfare and trust in local government in
the United States implies that women who receive welfare may not interpret the benefits they receive as an expression of generosity from the government. I interpret this as a result of the conditions and structures of welfare programs in the United States, which do not create the same support system as welfare programs in Latin America. Governments’ direct involvement and investment in welfare programs in Latin America contrasts the negative connotation and controversial discourse surrounding social welfare programs in the United States.

With political interest, trust in elections, and trust in local government representing political attitudes, the data illustrates that women who receive welfare in Latin America have more positive political attitudes than non-welfare recipients, and receiving welfare in the United States has no effect on women’s political attitudes. This signifies that welfare induces micro-level political engagement among recipients in Latin America, and that welfare does not impact micro-level political engagement in the United States. Stronger and more positive political attitudes in Latin America illustrate that welfare programs are able to mobilize low income women to include themselves in the political sphere. The lack of relationship between welfare and political attitudes in the United States illustrates that American welfare programs do not create the same trust and interconnectedness that welfare programs in Latin America manage to cultivate.

_Civic Engagement:_

I use questions about community meeting attendance and women’s meeting attendance to signify civic engagement. Attending community and women’s meetings is political, even if the topics of conversations do not explicitly revolve around political issues. Talking about women-specific issues, problems solving techniques, or local issues are all political in the way they aim
to better the community through group communication and collective work. There is a positive correlation between women receiving welfare and attendance at both community and women’s meetings in Latin America, and no relationship between women receiving welfare and attending either type of meeting in the United States, as seen in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Community Meeting</th>
<th>Community Meeting</th>
<th>Women’s Meeting</th>
<th>Women’s Meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>0.3196225 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.4989317 (0.348)</td>
<td>0.1118244 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.0733155 (0.563)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.0000398 (0.995)</td>
<td>0.0744464 (0.047)</td>
<td>-0.0051088 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.000217 (0.980)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory</td>
<td>0.0075162 (0.862)</td>
<td>Omitted</td>
<td>-0.0272522 (0.003)</td>
<td>Omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.0054659 (0.005)</td>
<td>-0.0012597 (0.903)</td>
<td>0.0026638 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.0029839 (0.189)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.0031</td>
<td>0.0167</td>
<td>0.0085</td>
<td>-0.0027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Observations</td>
<td>13,894</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>12,657</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2: This regression depicts how welfare interacts with two forms of civic engagement in Latin America and the United States. In Latin America, welfare is correlated to increased attendance at community meetings, and increased attendance at women’s meetings. Significant coefficients are bolded.

Women who receive welfare are more likely to attend community meetings in Latin America than similarly situated women who do not receive welfare, while there is no relationship between women receiving welfare and attending community meetings in the United States. I interpret this to signify that women who receive welfare in Latin America experience higher levels of civic responsibility and dedication to their community, whereas women in the United States are no more committed to their community as a result of receiving welfare.

Another contrast between Latin America and the United States is the affect income has on community meeting attendance; income is correlated with community meeting attendance among women in the United States, but not in Latin America. This contrast provides reason to postulate
culture-specific reasons low income women would participate less in local politics in the United States, but not in Latin America. Another speculation is that welfare is correlated to community meeting attendance in Latin America because income does not pose as a barrier to participation. Although low income women participate at similar rates as higher income women, welfare mobilizes recipients to attend community meetings at higher levels than similarly situated women who do not receive welfare, which suggests that female welfare recipients may represent a disproportionately large percentage of attendees at community meetings.

Latin American women who receive welfare are also more likely to attend women-centered meetings than similarly situated women, while women who receive welfare in the United States are not more likely to attend women’s meetings. Since a typical requirement of welfare programs in Latin America is attending meetings with other recipients, it is consistent that women who partake in these programs attend more meetings than women who do not receive welfare. Furthermore, the negative correlation between income and women’s meeting is indicative of welfare recipients attending meetings as a condition of receiving benefits. Contradictory to Latin America, welfare programs in the United States do not mandate group meetings, and finding support groups or the time to take part in support groups is not accessible to everyone—and is especially inaccessible to the marginalized people who tend to be the recipients of welfare programs. Taking part in non-mandatory women centered groups in the United States is a privilege that many low income women do not have.

Welfare is significant in its contribution to Latin American women’s civic engagement, and thus welfare can mobilize women to increase their local political engagement. Taking part in community meetings and having a voice in local issues is a way to participate in the political realm, and increased attendance from women who receive welfare in Latin America illustrates
the increased engagement these women have with the polity. Past studies have shown that participating in the community is indicative of cultural attitudes towards welfare (Swartz et al. 2009), as people who participate in the community feel less alienated by their peers. Thus, increased civic engagement from women who receive welfare in Latin America suggests that being a welfare recipient is not stigmatizing nor isolating. The gendered structure of welfare in Latin America may be responsible for the non-stigmatized status of welfare recipients; women are chosen to receive welfare rather than men because women are seen as more responsible and better with money (Molineux and Thomson 2011). In contrast, women who receive welfare in the United States are not more civically engaged. When using community meeting attendance or women’s meeting attendance to represent civic engagement in the United States, welfare does not mobilize or alienate women from participating in their communities. This deviates from the results of Jennings’ (2001) study, which found that welfare recipients in the United States were less likely to be civically engaged. The larger sample size of this study and the gendered approach could be responsible for the disparate findings. The results of this study do not suggest a stigma surrounding welfare in the United States, yet the contrast from the positive correlation between welfare and civic engagement in Latin America implies that welfare programs or the perception of welfare programs in the United States fail to create the same community dedication as welfare programs in Latin America.

Conventional Political Participation:

I use voter registration and voter turnout to indicate conventional political participation as this data is available in every country that participates in the LAPOP survey. As illustrated in Table 3, there is not a significant relationship between women receiving welfare and voting or
registering to vote in Latin America or the United States—with the exception of Colombia.

However, each control variable in both the United States and Latin America is positively correlated to voting, which illustrates that income, age and compulsory voting are all significant in mobilizing women to engage in conventional forms of political participation.

The absence of a correlation between welfare and conventional participation illustrated in Table 3 contradicts the findings of past research conducted by Dunn (2017), De La O (2013) and Baez et. al (2013), which I hypothesize is due to my broader definition of welfare and analysis that exclusively focuses on women. All three of these past studies solely analyze recipients of conditional cash transfer programs, which means they excluded the same countries from their research, as many Latin American countries do not have Conditional Cash Transfer programs.


Table 3: This regression illustrates the impact welfare has on voting and voter registration among women in Latin America and women in the United States. The lack of significance in the relationship between both of the variables in the United States and Latin America suggest that welfare does not mobilize women to vote or register to vote in either region, when controlling for income, compulsory voting and age. Significant coefficients are bolded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Latin America Voting</th>
<th>United States Voting</th>
<th>Latin America Registration</th>
<th>United States Registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>0.0153398 (0.089)</td>
<td>0.1025602 (0.118)</td>
<td>-0.0044934 (0.539)</td>
<td>0.0816497 (0.167)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.0052306 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.0165665 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.0027663 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.0116543 (0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory</td>
<td>0.0485273 (0.000)</td>
<td>Omitted</td>
<td>0.0337291 (0.000)</td>
<td>Omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.0075615 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.0083025 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.0033969 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.0051138 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.1602</td>
<td>0.0443</td>
<td>0.0845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Observations</td>
<td>13,863</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>13,891</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Colombia

Out of the twenty-one countries in this study, Colombia is unique in the significant relationship between women receiving welfare and increased voter turnout, as illustrated in
Graph 2. Since Colombia is distinct in this correlation, I isolated data from Colombia and analyzed the relationship between women who receive welfare and other forms of political engagement. Table 4 illustrates that, among Colombian women, welfare is correlated with voter turnout, trust in local government, and attendance at community and women’s meetings. Women who receive welfare in Colombia are not more likely to be interested in politics or trust local elections, which deviates from the trend within other Latin American countries. While Colombian women who receive welfare are more likely to convey two forms of political engagement—civic engagement and conventional political participation—they are not more likely to have stronger or more positive political attitudes.


Graph 2: This predicted effects graph illustrates the likelihood of women voting in Colombia when controlling for income and age. The left side of the graph represents women who do not receive welfare, while the right side of the graph represents women who receive welfare. Thus, Colombian women who receive welfare are more likely to vote than similarly situated women who do not receive welfare.
While welfare is correlated with women’s voter turnout, income does not play a significant role in voter mobilization; the only significant relationship income has with any form of political engagement in Colombia is a positive correlation with political interest. Since this is distinct from the relationship income has with political engagement in other countries, I hypothesize welfare’s unique ability to mobilize voter turnout is because income does not pose a barrier to women engaging in conventional political participation. This suggests that income is the barrier that prevents women on welfare from voting in other countries; if welfare is able to mobilize women to vote exclusively in countries where income is not a barrier to political participation, then I posit income’s correlation with voting is too strong for most welfare programs to overcome.

Another possible explanation for the differential impact welfare has on women’s levels of political engagement in Colombia is the structure of Colombian welfare programs. Welfare works differently in Colombia than it does in other countries; each household is given a number
based on the SISBEN index, which indicates the households’ need for subsidies and social assistance (Castañeda 2005). The SISBEN index takes multiple variables into account, such as education, income, and health histories (Castañeda 2005). There are numerous types of welfare programs within Colombia, and households that fall below a certain number on the index are eligible for different programs (International Labour Office 2015). Each welfare program has a different index number that the household must fall beneath to apply, thus stratifying benefits between different levels of low income people. For example, a larger number of low income people are eligible for subsidized healthcare than are eligible for food stamps (International Labour Office 2015). This approach to welfare recognizes that poverty is not binary, and that varying levels of impoverishment can be addressed through different tactics.

A distinguishing difference between Colombia’s welfare programs and other welfare programs is the “enhanced role given to community participation” (World Bank 1990 pg. 23). There are multiple welfare programs within Colombia, and the overarching theme of governmental welfare programs is an emphasis on civic engagement. Thus, the increased voter turnout rate among Colombian women who receive welfare could derive from welfare programs’ commitment towards enhancing civic engagement. This is congruent with the increased community meeting attendance and women’s meeting attendance among Colombian welfare recipients depicted in Table 4. While the trend in Latin America depicts a positive correlation between women receiving welfare and increased civic engagement as well, Colombia is unique in the government’s intent of encouraging civic participation to engage entire communities in the process of alleviating poverty. Thus, the deliberate emphasis on community participation—not just attendance at welfare recipient meetings—can help explain the increase in voter turnout among women welfare recipients.
Discussion

My results illustrate that women who receive welfare in Latin America are more likely to engage in two forms of political engagement: they have more positive political attitudes and are more civically engaged. In the United States, welfare does not have significant relationships with any of the tested forms of political engagement. Only in Colombia is there a correlation between conventional political participation and women who receive welfare. The increased political engagement expressed by women welfare recipients in Latin America illustrate welfare programs’ abilities to surpass barriers to the political sphere. Although the forms of political engagement enhanced by receiving welfare in Latin America are not directly impacting the electorate, being interested in politics, trusting political processes, and being engaged with a community are non-conventional ways lower income women can engage with the polity on an everyday basis. Although welfare does not increase women’s voter turnout rates, it does enable this demographic to actively participate in democracy by developing political complexes and having their voices heard in community settings.

The lack of correlation between any form of political engagement and women who receive welfare in the United States illustrates that welfare does not enable lower income women to overcome the structural barriers that inhibit their participation in the political processes. The lack of mobilizing power welfare has on political engagement among women in the United States indicates that welfare programs are not focused on—or at least not succeeding at—connecting impoverished women with their community. Rather than implementing a system of mutual trust between welfare recipients and the government, as is the perception in Latin America, American women who receive welfare are just as
disconnected and disenfranchised as low income women who do not receive welfare benefits.

The contrast between welfare’s mobilizing effect on women’s political engagement in Latin America and lack of significant relationship with political engagement in the United States suggests that different structures of welfare programs, different ways of implementing welfare programs, or differential cultural attitudes surrounding welfare programs could be responsible for the disparity. It is feasible that a negative stigma associated with receiving welfare alienates women on welfare in the United States from engaging in politics, while the pride and sense of responsibility felt by women who receive welfare in Latin America enhances their desire to give back to the community and government that assists them. It is also possible that different structures and conditions of welfare programs in Latin America and the United States are responsible for the disparity in mobilization power. However, since welfare programs vary by country, yet each of the twenty countries in Latin America utilized in this study experienced similar trends, the structure of welfare in the United States would need to vary drastically from other countries’ programs to explain its divergence from this trend.

The one consistency between welfare and political engagement in Latin America and the United States is the lack of correlation between welfare and conventional forms of political participation. Only Colombian women who receive welfare report increased rates of voting. I argue that welfare is not able to mobilize voter registration or voter turnout because of the influence income has on these two types of conventional political participation. Since Colombia is the only country where welfare is correlated to increased conventional political participation, and the only country where income is not correlated to voter turnout, I posit
income is the barrier that welfare cannot overcome to provide an avenue for conventional political participation among women who receive welfare.

**Conclusion**

Healthy democracies rely on political engagement to ensure the interests of all people are represented. Increased political engagement among women who receive need-based government assistance is vital for democratic legitimacy, as too often the voices of marginalized people are suppressed in political discourse, and thus the polity fails to represent the needs of oppressed people. The mobilizing power of welfare that allows low income Latin American women to overcome barriers to political engagement suggests that a reformation of welfare policies or attitudes in the United States could increase political engagement among oppressed populations, and thus enhance democratic legitimacy. People who require need-based welfare often experience multiple other forms of marginalization, and thus increasing political engagement among welfare recipients is enhancing the voices of people who experience overlapping oppressions.

Future research would benefit from utilizing data with more demographic and identity information to enable a more intersectional analysis. To understand the reason welfare mobilizes women to engage in politics in some countries but not others, future researchers could compare different types of welfare programs to discover whether it is the structure of the program or the conditions accompanying the benefits that causes disparate political mobilizing power. Similarly, data could be collected to understand cultural attitudes and opinions towards welfare recipients and welfare programs to discern whether perceptions of welfare recipients are correlated to political engagement.
The increase in political engagement among Latin American women who receive welfare, and the lack of correlation between welfare and any form of political engagement in the United States, suggests that the United States could make changes to the structure and implementation of welfare programs, and work towards changing cultural attitudes surrounding welfare, to intentionally enhance the voices of suppressed people in political spaces. If receiving welfare is an avenue for women to overcome structural barriers to political engagement in some countries, it is reasonable to assume other countries could follow suit, and thus enhance the diversity of the voices heard in the political arena, and increase the legitimacy of the government.
Appendix

Graph 3: This bar graph represents voting rates by gender in Latin America and the United States.

Graph 4: This graph represents welfare's impact on voting in countries without enforced compulsory voting laws (comp=0), compulsory voting laws for literate people (comp=1) and enforced compulsory voting laws for all people (comp=2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voted</th>
<th>Latin America</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>0.328149</td>
<td>0.8115146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust In Local Government</td>
<td>-0.0159263</td>
<td>0.1636468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.246</td>
<td>0.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust In Elections</td>
<td>0.0524347</td>
<td>0.0698684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>0.336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.0249286</td>
<td>0.0773962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory</td>
<td>0.3830542</td>
<td>Omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.0540506</td>
<td>0.0612685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R Squared</td>
<td>0.0997</td>
<td>0.2071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Observations</td>
<td>12,542</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Works Cited


